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The debate on justice in education has long been focussed on the idea of *equality*. Those who criticise education systems for being unjust often point to inequalities within these systems. In this respect, they often use the notion of equality *of opportunity*. In recent years, however, an alternative to equality-based conceptions of educational justice has arisen. *Adequacy*-oriented accounts claim that we should consider an education system as just, if all students can gain an *adequate* education. In this view, it is not necessary to distribute education (or educational opportunity) equitably among the students. This idea arose in American public discourse, and in legislation regarding education, and was taken up in philosophical theory (Anderson 2007; Satz 2007; see also Koski/Reich 2007).

In what follows, the main lines of argument in the debate between philosophical adherents of equality and adequacy in education are outlined. This is a debate within the context of distributive justice. Equality and adequacy are discussed as diverging principles of distribution, referring to one particular social sphere, namely education. The first part focuses on the idea of educational equality in its various versions, and the second part turns to accounts of educational adequacy. The final part considers two possible perspectives of this debate.

Educational equality

The idea of educational equality can be specified in different ways. One way to distinguish different egalitarian views is to ask what exactly it is that should be equalized; in short, educational equality *of what*? Possible answers are: Educational resources, quality, opportunities, or outcomes. A second question is whether we should aim at strict equality, or accept certain inequalities as legitimate.

For instance, we could opt for strict equality of resources (Brighouse 2002). This idea is typically put forward in the Anglo-American context where educational inequalities are to a significant extent rooted in economic inequalities. In the US, there are large inequalities of resources within the public school system. Both in the US and the UK, there is a system of expensive private schools that is only accessible for children from socially privileged backgrounds.

It seems clear, however, that equality of resources can go along with significant inequalities of educational quality, opportunity, or outcome. Equal resources do not

directly translate into educational quality. Providing an equal quality of education to all requires that the different needs, abilities, or motivations of students are taken into account. It might also be that providing equal educational quality to biologically or socially disadvantaged students requires special resources. Even strong support for disadvantaged children is unlikely to lead to equal outcomes. Strict equality of outcome or achievement could most likely only be realized by holding back the more able and motivated students from developing their full capacities. This, however, seems morally objectionable. A popular alternative to the ideal of equal outcomes is equality of opportunity. Here, it is important to distinguish opportunities *for* education (educational opportunities) from opportunities acquired *through* education (e.g., opportunities in the competition for social advantages). John Rawls's principle of fair equality of opportunity, for instance, addresses this latter problem. Of course, the distribution of educational opportunities affects persons' opportunities in social competitions, but access to education is also relevant for other purposes (e.g., political participation).

The notion of educational opportunity is more problematic than it might seem. On the one hand, it seems clear that in practices of teaching and learning, no particular outcome can be ensured by the school or the teacher. Teachers can motivate children, or put pressure on them, but they cannot 'make' them learn. This view is based on the idea that learning is an activity that persons have to engage in by themselves. To educate them does not mean, then, to shape them without their own doing, but to provide them with 'opportunities' to learn. So, with regards to the theory of teaching and learning, it seems fully appropriate to use this concept.

On the other hand, however, the school system cannot merely offer opportunities to children. To have an opportunity is to be provided with a choice – the opportunity can be taken or forfeited. Insofar as mandatory schooling is justified, children cannot waive their opportunity for education. Moreover, it is well known that children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (and their parents) often forfeit opportunities for education that are provided to them. So, certain social inequalities in education cannot be overcome by merely opening up opportunities.

One of the most widely endorsed egalitarian principles of educational justice is the so-called *meritocratic* principle that requires equal educational opportunities (or 'prospects') for those equally talented and willing (Brighouse/Swift 2008 and 2014). It is related to Rawlsian fair equality of opportunity, according to which those with equal talents and an equal will to use them should have equal chances in the competition for social positions. Rawls's principle – just like the corresponding educational conception – does not demand strict equality (of opportunity), but legitimizes those types of inequalities that are thought of as naturally given (inequalities of 'talent'). In addition, it also allows for inequalities due to unequal effort, although motivation or ambition are partly rooted in family background. This is considered as problematic even by the defenders of this view.

Moreover, the notion of talent employed in these principles might be called into question. Talent, as it is used here, means natural potential. There is a longstanding debate on whether there are biologically fixed talents or potentials. One position is that talent itself evolves in social and educational processes, and is not pregiven in a person's biological nature.

A further point is that fully realizing these principles seems incompatible with the autonomy or even the existence of the family. It does not seem realistic to compensate students for educationally salient inequalities that are due to the conditions of upbringing in the family. The state would have to intervene into family life or abolish

the family altogether to fully neutralize the effects of social background. This problem is typically settled by subordinating meritocratic principles to a principle of parental autonomy (Brighouse/Swift 2008).

A final point of critique – already present in Rawls's *Theory of Justice* – is that it is not clear why inequalities due to natural factors ('talent') should be justified. Both natural and social inequalities seem *arbitrary from a moral point of view*, since neither of them is *deserved*. This idea was taken up by so-called luck egalitarian accounts. The notion of desert, as it is used here, refers to responsible agency. It is clear that we can neither be responsible for our biological endowment, nor for our social background. The consequence is that inequalities due to unequal endowment are not less unjust than socially originated inequalities. In educational terms, this could mean that educational inequalities should neither be due to natural traits ('talents') of persons nor to their family background, but only due to personal choices. This might be called the 'radical conception' of educational justice (Brighouse/Swift 2014). As children cannot be fully responsible for their choices, it seems that this conception comes close to the demand to equalize outcomes (see, however, Calvert 2014).

An alternative to the radical conception is to be found in *Theory of Justice*. Rawls complements 'meritocratic' fair equality of opportunity with the so-called difference principle. This principle states that social and economic inequalities among individuals are only legitimate if they work out to the benefit of those who are worst off. In the current debate, accounts of this type are sometimes called 'prioritarian', as they call for giving priority to those worst off in society. It might be assumed that in some cases, diminishing inequalities and thereby improving the *relative* position of the worst off makes them worse off, in *absolute* terms. In these cases, Rawls's difference principle states, it is required by justice to maintain the existing inequality. Rawls's idea is that persons should be educated according to their talent (meritocracy), but that talents should be seen as a common good in society. They should be made to work for the benefit of everyone, in particular those worst off. Recall that the meritocratic principle demands we provide equal educational prospects for the equally talented. It does not determine, however, how groups of equally talented persons should be treated compared to each other. In other words: The meritocratic principle, in its current philosophical formulations, is compatible with privileging the more talented – or with providing more resources for the less talented. It has been proposed to use the difference principle to settle this issue (Brighouse/Swift 2008; Schouten 2012): If privileging the naturally talented works out to the benefit of everyone, then it should be done; if not, more attention should be given to those with less or least talent. However, applying the difference principle in

this way presupposes that talent is a natural trait of persons, and that the talented can be properly identified.

Educational equality is a multi-facetted concept that is often used in an unprecise way. Its proponents must make clear how they understand the concept, and critique must be directed at particular conceptions of educational equality. One objection that has been put forward against the meritocratic principle and other egalitarian views is that these accounts do not demand that all students are 'adequately' educated. Equality can be established on a low educational level. This point can be related of the so-called *levelling-down objection* against egalitarian accounts of distributive justice: Equality – in education or elsewhere – can be reached be worsening the position of the better off.

Educational Adequacy

As an alternative to egalitarian accounts of educational justice, adequacy views have been developed. The idea of adequacy has sometimes been adopted for pragmatic reasons, by people who have not given up their egalitarian commitments. In public discourse – especially in the US – it has proven successful to operate with a claim for an adequate education, instead of repeating the highly contested ideal of equality. Who could deny that all children deserve to be adequately educated?

But the idea has also been taken up for theoretical reasons. Philosophically, the plea for adequacy is related to a general critique of distributive egalitarianism (Anderson 2007; see also Anderson 1999): It has been claimed that an equitable distribution of goods is not valuable in itself, but that instead, it is of primary importance that each person has *enough* of the relevant goods (Frankfurt 1987). The turn from equality to *sufficiency* also addresses the levelling down objection already mentioned. Within the sufficientarian framework, inequalities above the sufficiency level are not unjust. In education, then, no one has to be hindered from reaching a high level of achievement that is more than sufficient. It should be admitted, though, that the sufficiency view is *consistent* with levelling down (Brighouse/Swift 2014): It does not require that persons have access to an education above the sufficiency level.

Proponents of the adequacy view have to clarify, then, which level or type of education is sufficient or adequate. Here, the crucial question is: Adequate *for what*? Thus, setting a standard of adequacy requires reference to other purposes. For instance, it might be taken as a purpose that every person has access to the labour

market. The adequacy standard might then be defined with respect to that purpose. The standard is met, in this case, if everybody can gain an education that enables him or her to access the labour market.

It seems clear that in setting an adequacy standard, we must take into account the general social, economic, and political conditions in a given society. Access to the labour market requires different sorts of capacities, in different economic settings. In defining adequacy, we must not only set the right *level* of education, but also consider educational *aims*. Being adequately educated means to have the right kind of capacities or forms of knowledge for a given purpose (e.g., access to the labour market). The adequacy standard must not only refer to a set of capacities, but also to the specific institutional conditions (such as diploma). An adequacy standard directed at one system might be irrelevant when applied to another system. Of course, the adequacy view might also be used to criticise existing institutional settings.

It should be noted, moreover, that the adequacy of one person's education also depends on how well others are educated. This is especially clear with regards to access to the labour market. So, the adequacy view must entail 'comparative' elements (Satz 2007). This is relevant because the sufficientarian account of justice is usually presented as 'non-comparative'.

Recent conceptions work with a notion of equality in moral and political relationships, as contrasted to distributive equality (Anderson 2007; Satz 2007). They are based on the assumption that democratic or civic equality does not necessarily entail an equitable distribution of goods such as education. Living as an equal in a democratic society, it is assumed, requires not only economically valuable capacities, but also the ability to participate in the democratic process. In addition, persons should be autonomous with regards to their personal lives. The adequacy view typically amounts to a conception of basic education that involves these different dimensions. It defines a threshold level that should, if ever possible, be reached by everyone (Satz 2007). Alternatively, the idea of adequacy or sufficiency is used in the field of elite education (Anderson 2007). This requires setting a high sufficiency level. Reaching this level should provide persons with access to the social elite.

Proponents of the adequacy view also have to answer the question: Adequacy *of what?* This question is analogous to the question: Equality of what? The idea of adequacy seems naturally tied to an outcome-based view. It is the acquired capacities or forms of knowledge that enable persons, for instance, to participate in democratic relationships. As was already made clear, however, educational outcomes cannot be

guaranteed by the school-system. This is why the notion of educational opportunity comes into view, again. The idea might be that persons should have effective opportunities to gain an adequate education.

The main objection that is put forward against the adequacy view is that inequalities above a given threshold level can amount to serious forms of injustice. This seems especially clear with regard to education in its 'positional' dimension: In the competition for social rewards, each difference in the level of education can become salient. So, if a general threshold level is set, it is attractive to gain an education that is more than adequate. Wealthy parents might be encouraged to use private financial means in order to privilege their children in social competitions.

A related objection is based on a thought experiment: Imagine that the ideal of adequacy would in fact be realized in a given society. Suddenly, the state unexpectedly became able to spend an additional amount of money on education. How should this money be used? The objection against the adequacy view is that it is indifferent with regards to this question. So, the additional resources could legitimately be spent on the socially privileged, or the specially talented (Brighouse/Swift 2014).

Perspectives

The philosophical debate on equality and adequacy in education was originally initiated under the premise that the essence of educational justice can and should be expressed in one single principle – equality or adequacy. Alternatively to this 'monism' of principles, 'pluralistic' conceptions of educational justice might be considered. Indeed, educational egalitarians have pointed out that an adequacy principle might as well be included in their account (Brighouse/Swift 2014). They agree that a just education system must ensure both adequacy and equality. Their critique of the adequacy view amounts to the claim, then, that adequacy is not enough.

Defenders of the adequacy view might address this critique by including egalitarian principles into their account. If it is acknowledged that a conception of adequacy must contain comparative elements, some sort of egalitarianism has already taken root within the adequacy view. It should also be noted that current accounts of adequacy also entail versions of Rawls's difference principle.

Building egalitarian ideas into the adequacy view seems most urgent when it comes to the problem of fair competition for social awards. One way to reconcile the

two principles is to say that they refer to different *functions* of the education system in the liberal democratic state: One of its functions is to enable persons to participate economically and politically in the life of the community. For this purpose, it seems appropriate to set up a threshold of basic education. Another function is, however, to ensure fair social competition. Regarding this function, egalitarian principles seem appropriate.

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